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# SAMUEL BUTLER'S GOD

BY FELIX GRENDON

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THE American publication of *God the Known and God the Unknown* reminds us that Butler was both a moralist who never moralized and an artist whose sense of the divine caused him to reject all traditional systems of divinity. His religion was not a pigeon-holed affair to be lugged out once every Wednesday prayer meeting and twice on Sundays, but an essence of his personality, a mental factor inseparable from his conception of life or his thoughts on art, philosophy, and science. Thus it is basic in the very bone and tissue of all his work, in his evolutionary and fictional writings quite as much as in his ecclesiastical satires, *Erewhon Revisited* and *The Fair Haven*. But what is colloidal in any Butlerian masterpiece is crystallized in the essays about the known and the unknown God. What is held in implicit suspension elsewhere is explicitly stated here. The cardinal points in Butler's religious view of the world are here laid down with his usual distinguished command of simple, supple, compact speech.

*God the Known and God the Unknown* is a sermon on the brotherhood and Godhead of man without a line of preaching and without a single mention of the words brotherhood or Godhead. Others have no doubt toyed or toiled with the conception of the essential unity and divinity of all forms of life on earth. It remained for Butler to consider and establish this conception, not as a flight of Utopian speculation or an exercise in sentimental gush, but as an essay in straightforward thinking and a matter of cool common-sense.

The nucleus of Butler's religious faith is a biological idea. He believed that the course of evolution has been shaped, in the main, by the design or purpose of the evolving creature, or, to put it more fully, that organic variations are effected

in the creature by its own effort, trial, and error under the spur of its own will to satisfy new needs or meet changed conditions. The creator, then, is nothing less than the designing or purposeful creature itself; he is not without but within the living organism; God and the living organism are, in fact, identical. This is the nucleus which expands, under Butler's hands, into a much more definite conception. Before we examine this conception closely, it may be well to glance hurriedly at the struggle its author entered upon when he took up the cudgels in the seventies and eighties.

It was a struggle of no mean proportions, although, now that Butler's ideas have triumphed and have completely permeated the educated conscience of our day, it may be easily belittled. What Butler had then to contend with, however, was the new scientific clique on the one hand, and the old theological caste on the other. The first, puffed up with the prestige of the year 1859, had the aggressive backing of scientists and rationalists of almost every shade. The second, defeated in the field but not dislodged from power, was still hopeful of retrieving the fortunes of the orthodox under cover of the artillery of Paley. The two camps divided the world of speculative thought and polite letters absolutely between them. No outsider had a look in. And anyone who tilted a free lance in equal contempt of their partisan rallying cries got as warm a welcome from the ruling chiefs of Science or the Church as an insurgent politician might expect from the chiefs of the regular Conservative or Liberal machines.

Nobody knew this better than Butler. Yet, being gifted or plagued with an incorruptible critical instinct of the very highest order, he could not espouse either side of a quarrel in which he held both champions to be alike in the wrong. The intellectual situation at the time was something like this: Charles Darwin and his followers had made a clean sweep of the old Mosaic tribal deity with such bag and baggage as the hell fire torments and the infant damnation nonsense. Freed from the long reign of terror of a vindictive theology the world gave a sigh of huge relief, canonized Darwin, and celebrated the new rational order. Thus it was not at first noticed that, in their haste to expel a cruel Designer from the scheme of things, the scientists had also expelled design, or that, in destroying every vestige of the six-day creation, they had also destroyed every vestige of a creator. The new order of which Darwin was the patron saint and Natural Selection

the prime article of faith denied that purpose was the principle underlying the development of life. Instead, a "fortuitous concourse of atoms" ruled supreme.

Butler was among the first to be revolted by the soulless, purposeless, mechanistic universe of the Natural Selection theory. He had no greater love for the standard Theological view, in which men were treated as if they were the sport of God, than for the Pagan view in which

Like flies to wanton boys are we to the gods,  
They kill us for their sport.

But he was unable to prefer the new scientific view to the older Theological and Pagan views simply because, instead of treating men as the sport of a God or gods, it treated them as the sport of luck. On the contrary, he saw that the Darwinian explanation, in "banishing mind from the world," and replacing the living will by a dreary, endless accumulation of lucky accidents, was no explanation at all. And he felt sure that men would never have accepted it as such save that, in their eagerness to escape from the monstrous Canaanitish idea of the fall of man through natural depravity, they failed to notice that the Darwinian idea of the descent of man through the operation of sheer chance was only less monstrous by a degree.

Butler's advocacy of purpose met with the bitterest opposition from the Darwinian camp. That he urged his theory on strictly biological grounds did not mollify his opponents. The positions and fortunes of the high priests of Science were committed to the undying support of Darwin's version of evolution. For this was the version to which they owed their dominance and any move to discredit and overthrow it was *ipso facto* a move to discredit and overthrow them. Another and more charitable view may be taken of their hostility. They may have thought that they smelled a rat. To the rationalists, the idea of a designed or purposeful world was indissolubly bound up with the worship of Jehovah. They had been at great pains to destroy Jehovah root and branch. They did not mean supinely to let their work be undone through the stealthy reintroduction of purpose. They guessed Jehovah when they heard purpose, as the Irishman guessed a hen's egg when he saw shells, without pausing to make sure whether a hen or an artisan had produced them. With like haste, the rationalists may have looked on Butler's contention that purpose is the principle

underlying the origin of species as merely another furtive step towards rehabilitating the Jehovah worship.

As a matter of fact, Butler had not the remotest wish to give new life to an old skeleton. True, he fully accepted Paley's evidences of purpose at work in the world, as well as Paley's conclusion that these evidences point irresistibly to a creator. But there his agreement with the Archdeacon stopped. Paley went on to place this creator on a throne in the skies in some indeterminate spot not to be identified by the usual processes of geography or astronomy. Butler contended, on the other hand, that the words Creator or God, in so far as we can use them with any meaning whatever, mean a person or an organism, one infinitely vaster than a man, no doubt, and one whose life may be considered eternal in comparison with a man's, but one who is none the less a person with both a body and a soul such as we habitually imply when the word person is used.

Accept this contention at its simple face value and two interesting questions at once arise. How do the Pantheist and Theist ideas of God square with Butler's humanly intelligible definition? And where, if there is a God with both a body and a soul, is this Person to be found?

Butler disposes of the first question by maintaining that Pantheism and Theism, the two heads under which the most widely accepted civilized religions fall, are alike Atheism in disguise. Thus the Pantheists believe in a divine principle or energy or soul diffused through and yet separable from the inert cosmic matter it animates. If this incoherent idea can be said to have any meaning for us at all, it is really a complete denial of God. For a God is a person with a body as well as a soul, whereas the animating principle of Pantheism is bodiless. Can a principle be personified, as the Pantheists personify it, without any thought of attaching it to a definite body? Butler points out that "there is no living organism untenanted by Spirit, nor any Spirit perceivable by man apart from an organism embodying and expressing it."

The more recent Pantheists, again, who subscribe to the theory of evolution, appear to believe that the several forms of life have varied while the force or principle of life has remained a constant factor. This Pantheism is neither clearer nor more acceptable than the Pantheism of Wordsworth or Giordano Bruno. Can anyone conceive of Life as becoming more and more highly organized without at the same time

thinking of the Life Force as becoming more and more highly organized? To think of the evolution of Life and not concurrently to think of the evolution of the Life Force is to form an idea that baffles common-sense analysis. Clear-minded people will hardly wish to follow the Pantheists further. They "speak of a person without meaning a person; they speak of a 'him' and a 'he' without having in their minds the idea of a living person with all its inevitable limitations." The most we can say for Pantheistic believers is that they have tried to lay hold of an important truth but have not quite succeeded in capturing it.

Orthodox Theists are in a like case. They, too, speak of their supreme being as a Person. But this Person turns out on examination to be a Person without a body and without a residence tangible to any of our senses. In short, he proves to be an impersonal person, which is only another way of saying that he is no true person or God in any coherent sense at all.

Yet Theists and Pantheists and many adherents of more primitive creeds have for ages past agreed in sharing a deeply rooted human belief in "a God who is the Spirit and the Life of all that is, and who is a true person with an individuality and a self-consciousness of his own." Butler declares that an idea entertained by so many for so long a time must have some foundation. "But," he adds,

there can be no God who is not personal and material: and if personal, then, though inconceivably vast in comparison with man, still limited in space and time, and capable of making mistakes concerning his own interests, though as a general rule right in his estimates concerning them. Where, then, is this Being? He must be on earth, or what folly can be greater than speaking of him as a person? What are persons on any other earth to us, or we to them? He must have existed and be going to exist through all time, and he must have a tangible body. Where, then, is the body of this God? And what is the mystery of his Incarnation?

This is Butler's own statement of the second question. To understand his answer fully, the reader must follow him over the ground covered in the fascinating pages of *Life and Habit*. The central feature of this book is its daring explanation of the sureness and unconsciousness with which a person goes through extremely complex functions like the circulation of the blood. Butler held that this sureness and unconsciousness are achieved only by trial, error, and innumerable repetitions made, through long epochs of time, by the *same*

*person*. Therefore, when a man circulates his blood with unconscious accuracy, we must see *this one man* as having performed the act countless times not only in his own body but in the body of his forefathers for untold generations. When an embryo develops in the womb we must see *this same embryo* as having pursued its embryonic career over and over again, until it has come to know the steps so well that it now remembers them unconsciously or goes through them without conscious thinking. What this means is that an offspring and its parent must be seen as identical, any child being as much a part or continuation of its ancestors as the octogenarian is of his own six-year-old self.

As soon as we grasp this highly original conception of the continuity of personality, we shall cease to look on plants and animals as strictly separate organisms. We shall recognize all animal and vegetable life as "united by a subtle ramification, so that all living things are as one tree-like growth, forming a single compound person."

With this key, evolution becomes a surprisingly clear, definite, and workable conception. It is as if some huge continent whose coasts we have touched here and there and whose vast interior we have guessed at, is set before us by a bold explorer who has circumnavigated and charted it. We are straightway placed in a position where science and religion may be understood as at one, where the old "quarrel" between them may be "reconciled," to use a curious popular phrase of the previous century. As if a truly religious attitude could be unscientific or a truly scientific attitude could be irreligious! And the convinced Butlerian can effect the "reconciliation" without putting mystic constructions on the discoveries of the one or giving symbolic interpretations to the claims of the other. Now it is between the inference of science that all living forms have been organized from protoplasm and the inference of religion that a divine purpose is the instigating principle of mutation, that the conflict has been supposed to lie. Conflict becomes harmony in Butler's magnificently simple conception of a protoplasm-creature or a protoplasm-Creator (call it either or both) whose sense of need or purposive will is the mainspring of creative evolution. By virtue of this conception, both the experimental findings of the biologist and the intuitional faith of the believer in design become acceptable to the best men and women "whose instincts," as Earnest says in *The*

*Way of All Flesh*, "are in themselves an evidence not lightly to be set aside."

This, then, is the most astonishing feature of Butler's theory of personal identity. The same stroke by which he gives evolution a backbone of purpose enables him to give religion a backbone of evolution. In a biological inquiry into the son of Man, he rediscovers God, just as in a religious inquiry into the son of God, he rediscovers Man. For, how are we to denote this mighty corporate personality of which men, animals, and plants are but the composite items? In its inconceivable vastness and antiquity, it exceeds a man as much as a man exceeds the living, self-conscious cells of which he is formed. In comparison with a single man or plant, it may indeed be said to be as nearly infinite in extent or eternal in duration as the coherence of such words will allow. Can we conceive of the purpose and spirit that animate this mighty composite Person under any meaner name than God? Butler thinks not. He says:

A single God-impregnate substance is the parent from which all living forms have sprung . . .

. . . All living forms, whether animal or vegetable, are in reality one animal; we and the mosses being part of the same vast person in no figurative sense, but with as much *bona fide* literal truth as when we say that a man's finger-nails and his eyes are parts of the same man . . . It is in this Person that we may see the Body of God—and in the evolution of this Person, the mystery of His Incarnation.

. . . The Theologian dreams of a God sitting above the clouds among the cherubim, who blow their loud uplifted angel trumpets before Him, and humour Him as though He were some despot in an Oriental tale; but we enthrone Him upon the wings of birds, on the petals of flowers, on the faces of our friends, and upon whatever we most delight in of all that lives upon the earth. We then can not only love Him, but we can do that without which love has neither power nor sweetness, but is a phantom only, an impersonal person, a vain stretching forth of arms towards something that can never fill them—we can express our love and have it expressed to us in return. And this not in the uprearing of stone temples—for the Lord dwelleth in temples made with other organs than hands—nor yet in the cleansing of our hearts, but in the caress bestowed upon horse and dog, and the kisses upon the lips of those we love.

But there are also points of agreement between the Butlerian faith and orthodoxy—points, moreover, on which Butler makes orthodox phrases clearer to the Theist than they can ever have been before. He begins with the well-known statement that man has been made in the image of God. Plainly, the theologian cannot mean what he says,



since nothing horrifies him more than the suggestion that his God has a body. Butler explains that

each of our tributary selves is so far made after the likeness of the body corporate that it possesses all our main and essential characteristics—that is to say, that it can waste and repair itself; can feel, move, and remember. To this extent, also, we—who stand in mean proportional between our tributary personalities and God—are made in the likeness of God; for we, and God, and our subordinate cells alike possess the essential characteristics of life which have been above recited. It is more true, therefore, for us to say that we are made in the likeness of God than for the orthodox Theologian to do so.

Passages equally pregnant and distinguished might be multiplied without number until the text of *God the Known* and *God the Unknown* were quoted wholesale. No lover of Butler will fail to remedy the omission at first hand or, at any rate, miss reading the two very witty, profoundly moving chapters on *The Likeness of God* and *The Life Everlasting*. In the first of these, Butler shows how much clearer, richer, and more intelligible certain widely current expressions become in the light of his conception of a panzoistic God. Among the citations are Christian expressions like “God has taken our nature upon Him”; Jewish expressions like “He knoweth our down-sitting and our up-rising”; popular expressions like “God helps them that help themselves” (because in helping themselves they are helping Him); and Roman expressions like “*vox populi, vox Dei*.” Butler’s droll and keen analysis should be read for pure delight, even though the interpretations themselves may now seem easy to anticipate.

*The Life Everlasting* is an essay on the life after death. Butler believes with all his might in this continuance of life. He offers us immortality, but he does not offer us resurrection from the dead. Will reasonable men crave a greater boon or prefer to this offer the orthodox offer of immortality weighted down by resurrection? There is, in truth, no promise that a man will repeat his specific individuality either on Earth or in Heaven or Hell, or that he will whisper spirit messages to Sir Oliver Lodge, or that his soul will migrate to a higher or a lower form. But there is an assurance that he will continue his life in the lives of those whom he has given birth to, or whom he sways through the thoughts and works he has begotten. Surely it is idle to pretend that, with our so-called deaths, our life ends in any complete sense, since we remain, what we have always been, influencing or

influential parts of that composite being who is the known God of this world and who, as human measurements go, may be said never to die.

So much for God the Known. But is there not perhaps some vaster person who looms behind our God and stands in the same relation to him as he to us? Butler considers it extremely probable. It is altogether likely, he says, that "the impregnator of this earth may have prepared the earth for the reception of his offspring, as a hen makes an egg-shell or a peach a stone for the protection of the germ within it. If so, this impregnator is one of the constituent "units of an unknown and vaster personality who is composed of Gods, as our God is composed of all the living forms on earth, and as all those living forms are composed of cells. This is the Unknown God. Beyond this second God we cannot at present go, nor should we wish to do so, if we are wise."

Clearly, no active, sensible man will show much greater concern about the destiny of God the Unknown than an active, sensible corpuscle is accustomed to show about the divine destiny of the man in whose bloodstream it courses. Into a matter so remote from the normal business of living, we may peer only at our peril. Our daily concern is with God the Known who lives in us as we live in Him, and whose welfare it is for our welfare to study closely.

Butler does not directly use his scientific and religious views to press home moral reforms or social propaganda. For the most part he is content to let reformers or propagandists fire off the ammunition he has manufactured. Yet, though he never ceases to deprecate mere moral indignation or proselyting fervor, and though he never runs up the colors of any specific reform or attempts *in hoc signo* to conquer the world, he nevertheless enters into direct action often enough and unmistakably enough to remove all doubt as to which side he cleaves to. As we have seen, Butler has no earthly use for the God of the Theists. Nor, in repudiating this omniscient nonentity and omnipotent vacuum, does he substitute a mystic Invisible King as H. G. Wells would do. He invites us to see God in a visible tangible Person, a Person who incorporates all the Life of our planet and possesses a remorselessly aspiring and self-improving nature.

And as regards Man—the governing organ of the corporate Person—what part is Man to play in this collective aspiration? Butler gives no express answer to this ques-

tion, but, in a hundred indirect ways, he reveals his belief that the human mission is a fourfold one. On man falls the responsibility of so dealing with religion, government, social economy, and education as will enable Life to organize itself into Life of a superior order. To recognize the clear title of every human being to divine rights and also to divine obligations, to effect a real equality of opportunity through a radical fiscal rearrangement, to abolish all retaliatory punishment, and to instruct the young in the truths that Life is turning into established facts, rather than in the facts (once truth,) that Death has already turned into veiled lies—this should be Man's programme. This was substantially the programme of Jesus. And neither more nor less than this has been the programme of every great reformer since the Christian era began.

FELIX GRENDON.